

## Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired

### Summary of SRC Involvement FFY 2019--Submitted by Harriet hall, SRC Chair

This FFY began in October 2018 with an SRC meeting that included important partner updates. These include representatives from the Agency of Education, Department of Labor, Special Services Library, Parent Family Network, Client Assistance Program, and the Association for the Blind. These updates are intended to keep the partners connected and informed about important initiatives.

Some highlights from this meeting included a detailed explanation from the AOE representative about the major shift in Vermont High School graduation requirements from traditional credits to Personal Learning Plans. There was also a presentation from the students of the Learn, Earn, and Prosper (LEAP) summer work experience program. The students presented their Public Service Announcement that they created and shared some things they learned about themselves and their future employment goals. One significant idea generated by the SRC was a recommendation to explore if local special education funding could share in the cost for LEAP work experiences.

Several SRC members also participated in White Cane Safety Awareness events that took place across the state. Each event included a simulated walk and education about White Cane Safety. Many local officials also attended.

November was a busy month and the SRC participated in a couple events. It began with several members attending the Vermont Chapter of the National Federation of the Blind Statewide Conference held in Burlington. The agenda included several guest speakers including a Vermont Transit employee who explained new public transportation initiatives.

Several SRC members also attended the DBVI Great Expectations Consumer Driven Event held in Montpelier. There was "Resiliency" and the meeting was planned by DBVI consumers. It included several panel discussions to share experiences and encourage each other.

In November there was an SRC Executive Council meeting. The Executive Committee meetings are held in the opposite months of Full SRC meetings and are in September, November, January, March, and May. The meetings typically focus on building the agenda for Full Council meetings and other business. There was no Full SRC meeting in December.

In February, the SRC meeting included several partner updates. Some highlights included an update from the Client Assistance Program and their current outreach efforts. Several materials have been developed and they are beginning to visit VR offices and other outreach events. There was also an announcement of the upcoming Technology fair that will be held in Rutland by the Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired. This will include several technology vendors and equipment demo opportunities for consumers.

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The DBVI Director reviewed the SRC 2018 Annual Report and discussed the data and highlights with the group. He also discussed the transition to the new Performance Measures and the ending of the previous Standards and Indicators. A DBVI counselor also presented an update about the Accessible Assessment Project. The DBVI assessment team has identified the core group of vocational related assessments and they are currently adapting them for accessibility. The workstation in Montpelier is complete and includes a computer, assistive software, Braille printer, and scanner.

In April, DBVI staff had an all-day meeting with the staff of the Vermont Association for the Blind and staff of the Veterans Administration. The main purpose was to discuss ways to partner and best serve the needs of Vermont's blind and visually impaired population. This was not specifically an SRC event, but the results and outcomes were shared with the group. One important highlight was the discussion about Low Vision doctors in Vermont. Many are retiring and there is a need to encourage and train new eye doctors to provide this service.

At the April SRC meeting, key partner updates included a recommendation from the AOE representative for members of the SRC and other service provider to sign up for the AOE Weekly Field Services Memo and the Training Modules for Personal Learning Plans. The representative from the Vermont Family Networks encouraged everyone to help promote the upcoming Youth Summit.

The agenda included an assistive technology demonstration and discussion from one of the SRC members. He presented about several of the apps that he uses and explained the situation when they are most helpful. Some of the apps highlighted were Voice Dream Reader and Seeing AI. The group also discussed several ideas for how to conduct focus groups for the needs assessment to be held in fall 2020.

In June, the SRC held an all-day combined meeting with the DBVI staff. This is an annual event and the agenda for this year included the theme of "Partners in a Vision Rehabilitation Team." The day was structured to invite all DBVI partners and have several workshops so partners could learn about the various roles of other Vision Rehabilitation Team members.

The first sessions included:

- Technology Evaluation and Training;
- Vermont Association of Business Industry and Rehabilitation and the Employment Consultants Role; and
- The Learn, Earn, and Prosper (LEAP) Summer Work Experience Program.

The second sessions included:

- Vocational Assessments presented by the DBVI Counselor Team;
- Questions and Answers with DBVI Blind Services Counselors; and

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- Vermont Association for the Blind and the role of Certified Vision Rehabilitation Therapists, Orientation and Mobility Specialist, and Teachers of the Visually Impaired; and

The afternoon included a discussion with the SRC that included:

- Outreach to Eye Doctors; and
- The use of social media and the “Front Page Forum” for Outreach.

One key idea was to ask the Outreach Committee to pursue these initiatives.

The SRC looks forward to the upcoming year where DBVI participants are “Better Off” with improved circumstances and services are delivered well.

Respectfully Submitted,  
Harriet Hall, SRC Chair

## Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired

### Division Philosophy

DBVI assists individuals who are blind or visually impaired to meet their employment and independence goals. DBVI uses a holistic rehabilitation approach that helps people to meet their goals, build new skills, and improve their circumstances. The goal is for all participants to achieve or sustain economic independence, self-reliance, and social integration consistent with their interests, abilities, and informed choices.

### Division Overview

DBVI helps working age individuals achieve economic independence by obtaining livable wage jobs and income. This involves training to improve employment skills and higher education that leads to degrees or certificates. DBVI helps transition high school students from school to the world of work. DBVI's statewide approach for younger students helps to ensure that all blind and visually impaired high school students have pre-employment transition skills. DBVI helps individuals of all ages to build adaptive skills related to their visual impairment through assistive technology, low vision, orientation and mobility, and independent living skills.

### Staff and Partners

DBVI services are provided by highly qualified professionals who possess specialized training and understanding of the implications of visual loss. Services are provided by ten staff from regional field offices in Montpelier, Burlington, Rutland, and Springfield. Each office has a Blind Services Rehabilitation Counselor and a Rehabilitation Associate who deliver individualized services. One Blind Services Technology Trainer covers the entire state teaching people how to use assistive technology. The Director of DBVI oversees the statewide program.

DBVI partners with several organizations to accomplish our mission. The major provider of direct instruction for teaching blindness-related skills is the non-profit Vermont Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (VABVI). Their staff include certified blindness professionals who are highly trained in the areas of Orientation and Mobility, Low Vision, and Rehabilitation Therapy. For other DBVI partners please visit

[www.dbvi.vermont.gov](http://www.dbvi.vermont.gov)

### Recent Developments and Accomplishments

This year DBVI organized several events around the state to educate the public about White Cane Safety Awareness. The white cane is a symbol of strength and independence, used by people who are blind as they travel independently. Members of the public received training in safe travel techniques from an Orientation and Mobility Instructor, increasing awareness of what it is like to travel with the white cane.

The main events were held in Brattleboro, Burlington, Montpelier, and Rutland. Each included a walk guided by an Orientation and Mobility Specialist to demonstrate proper use of the white cane and safe travel techniques. These events are great opportunities

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to educate the public and to have meaningful discussions about how blind and visually impaired individuals travel independently within their communities.

In addition to educational events, DBVI collaborates with several partners to create Vision Rehabilitation Teams. This year DBVI hosted a partner event at the annual State Rehabilitation Council meeting. Attendees included partners from the Agency of Education, Department of Labor, Community Rehabilitation Provider, Developmental Service, The Assistive Technology Program, Vocational Rehabilitation, and more. Participants had an opportunity to attend concurrent sessions that included detailed information about Orientation and Mobility Instruction; Low Vision Eye Examinations; Assistive Technology Evaluation and Training; Assessment Instruments for individuals who are Blind or Visually Impaired; Job Development; and Blindness Adaptive Skills Training. The feedback from the event emphasized how useful it was to learn how the partners of a Vision Rehabilitation team work together to assist an individual in pursuing their employment and independence goals.

DBVI also partnered and assisted with the Voc Rehab Vermont Transition Core Teams Conference. This statewide event brought together Transition Core Teams from schools and employment service providers to share ideas about how to assist students with disabilities with their employment goals. In addition, DBVI partnered with Voc Rehab Vermont for several events for the newly formed Student Advocacy Council. Several DBVI staff and consumers joined the planning team for the events.

DBVI has a commitment to ongoing training of staff to deliver services well. This year one staff member entered a master's program to become a Blind Services Rehabilitation Counselor. This individual is learning the latest techniques and strategies to help individuals explore and find a great career match.

### Future Directions

DBVI believes the best path forward includes a solid foundation in technology. Relevant new technologies emerge every day, and our staff stay current to help our customers achieve their employment and independence goals. One recent technology is an app called Voice Dream Scanner, which allows people to gain access to print documents. The user takes a picture of the paper document with the phone's camera and the app converts it to speech output. This provides access to information and makes it possible to accomplish many tasks independently.

DBVI staff recognize the importance of helping clients learn more about their own interests and strengths for employment. DBVI recently established a workgroup called the Investigation Empowerment Improvement Team. The purpose of this group is to provide DBVI consumers with increased opportunities for self-knowledge through assessment tools. This initiative will help participants to:

- Learn about interests, skills, and abilities for future career direction.
- Increase knowledge of Visual Impairment.
- Identify adaptive skills training that will decrease functional limitations.
- Increase self-knowledge.

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- Provide information for consumer career decision making.
- Identify transferrable skills.

This year the team evaluated several assessments and adapted them for accessibility when possible. DBVI believes that the approved instruments will help individuals gain self-knowledge and assist them as they pursue their employment goals. The team also established a fully accessible assessment workstation at the DBVI Montpelier office. This includes all the adaptive technology necessary for clients to complete assessments independently.

### Programs and Services

#### **Vision Rehabilitation Employment Services**

The goal of DBVI's vocational rehabilitation services is to help people with vision loss to retain, return, or secure employment. Individuals meet with a DBVI counselor to identify goals and develop a plan to improve their functional independence.

DBVI counselors provide guidance related to employment and help people explore interests and abilities. On their individual path to employment, most people who work with DBVI:

- Build and strengthen vocational skills;
- Learn new adaptive skills to remain independent regardless of vision loss;
- Learn to use specialized technology needed to do their jobs;
- Receive services to maximize visual function;
- Help with a job search and provide training in job skills;
- Assist with attending college; and
- Provide technology and training that allow people to access printed materials and complete work tasks.

DBVI is exceptionally proud of the accomplishments of our consumers. To read some success stories of our customers and their experiences with DBVI, visit our website: [www.dbvi.vermont.gov](http://www.dbvi.vermont.gov).

#### **Services for High School Students**

DBVI's transition services provide high school students with opportunities for learning job readiness, self-advocacy, and independent living skills. DBVI collaborates with several partners including the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), VABVI, ReSOURCE, and the Gibney Family Foundation. DBVI is also working with partners to make sure that all blind or visually impaired high school students are building solid pre-employment skills.

The LEAP (Learn, Earn, and Prosper) program provides paid summer employment for youth in a residential setting. LEAP empowers students to take charge of their employment future by gaining early employment success, and helps students make a successful transition from school to work.

#### **Independent Living Services**

DBVI helps individuals maintain independence. A DBVI rehabilitation associate meets an individual in his or her own home to discuss the individual's goals and develop a plan

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to achieve the highest possible degree of independence in activities such as traveling, preparing meals, and managing medications. Direct instruction is provided by certified blindness professionals through a grant agreement with the Vermont Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (VABVI). VABVI also administers the Older Blind Program to provide specialized vision rehabilitation services.

### **Technology**

Effective use of assistive technology is critical for many people with vision loss. DBVI invests significant effort to stay current in new assistive technology to help people find employment, participate in their communities, and eliminate other barriers caused by vision loss.

### **Results**

#### **Performance Measures**

How many people we serve (FFY 2019)?

- 248 individuals received services to assist them to maintain or find employment as a result of their vision loss.
- 892 individuals over the age of 55 received specialized vision rehabilitation services.
- 85 individuals under the age of 55 were served by the Independent Living Program.

How well we serve them:

**Customer Satisfaction:** The most recent results of the 3-year statewide random survey of all participants in the DBVI Vocational Vision Rehabilitation program (Conducted by Market Decisions in 2017; the next statewide survey is scheduled for fall 2020).

- 93% of respondents said they are satisfied with the DBVI vocational rehabilitation program.
- 93% of respondents said overall, they are better off as a result of the services they received from DBVI.
- 95% of respondents said that DBVI staff treated them with dignity and respect.
- 94% of respondents said that DBVI helped them achieve their vocational rehabilitation goals,
- 92% of respondents said that DBVI services met their expectations.
- 89% of respondents said that DBVI vocational rehabilitation services helped them become more independent.
- 84% of respondents said that DBVI helped them reach their job goals.

Our approach in assisting individuals who are blind or visually impaired on their path to employment and independence begins with the belief that each person can achieve their goals. We know that the “voice of the customer” is important and our strategies are geared to meeting those needs. Each staff member is committed to delivering services well and to making a difference in the lives of the people we serve.

How are people better off:

- 46 blind or visually impaired individuals closed their DBVI case in SFY 2019 with successful employment.

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- 57% had a wage above 125% of the minimum wage.

In annual closure surveys DBVI participants shared examples of how their new skills have helped them adapt to vision loss, maintain employment, and improve their quality of life. They reported being better off because they can now:

- Obtain their employment goals.
- Access printed material with the use of specialized blindness technology.
- Travel independently on the job and in the community with the use of the white cane.
- Use special magnification and lighting to access information on the job and at home.

The federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) requires DBVI to use 15% of the federal grant award to provide Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS). This new federal requirement created an opportunity for DBVI to expand Pre-ETS services in the core areas:

- Job exploration counselling;
- Work based learning opportunities;
- Counselling on post-secondary educational opportunities;
- Workplace readiness training; and
- Instruction in self-advocacy.

DBVI has been very successful in expanding Pre-ETS services for students who are blind or visually impaired by providing work-experiences, internships, and job readiness training to build skills necessary for career development. Learn, Earn, and Prosper (LEAP) is a program developed by DBVI to achieve these goals. Most students participate by living and working in the Burlington area in the summer. Other students participate to build job readiness skills during school year retreats and work experiences in their local communities. Our efforts to include more students led to a higher increase in the number of participants and in the number of training hours:

- The number of participants increased from 18 in 2014 to 74 in 2019.
- The number of work-based learning and job readiness training hours increased from 15,000 in 2014 to 21,000 in 2019.

The LEAP summer work experiences and school year retreats have resulted in significant skill gains for students developing employment and independent living skills that are essential for future employment. Each student receives a report of their progress which is shared with school teams, teachers of the visually impaired, and DBVI counselors. Students learn to identify their strengths and areas of vocational interest. They also learn specific job readiness skills including respect in the workplace, assistive technology, transportation strategies, workplace relationships, personal finance, interview practice, building a strong resume, and networking.

Students also received specialized services necessary to develop adaptive skills related to their blindness including Orientation and Mobility (O&M), Vision Rehabilitation

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Therapy, and Instruction in Assistive Technology. This resulted in a significant positive impact in their mobility skills in the community and at the work site. LEAP students received over 230 hours of O&M Instruction in 2019, as well as 40 hours in VRT (Vision Rehabilitation Therapy), and 400 hours in assistive technology instruction by a CATIS (Certified Assistive Technology Instructional Specialist).

DBVI has successfully expanded our services overall to youth. The percentage of population served who were under age 22 at entry into DBVI services has grown from 17% of people served in SFY 2014 to 29% of people served in SFY 2019.

Providing real work-based learning experiences in actual employment settings is one of the most effective ways to prepare youth for long term success. Therefore, DBVI has invested more resources in providing real-world internship opportunities. Internship placements at Vermont businesses include the Burlington Free Press, Burlington City Arts, Sangha Yoga Studio, Vermont Adaptive Ski and Sports, Vermont Community Gardens Network, the Overlook Café, the Waterbury Café, the Courthouse Café, the Flynn Theatre, Mt. Mansfield Media, Sara Holbrook Community Center, The Vermont Youth Conservation Corps, and the Vermont Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired.

- In 2019, 4 out of 5 interns were enrolled in college programs after LEAP, and the remaining Intern is working with their DBVI counselor to match their skills to a career path.

“I embraced challenges and new opportunities, worked on my leadership skills, and learned to not be afraid of communicating with people when I am unsure or need help with something.”

-LEAP Intern, Sangha Yoga Studio

“I learned that some things take time to learn, and you just have to be patient. I also learned the importance of communicating directly with people so they can help you meet your needs. I learned that it’s ok to be open and vulnerable with people to ensure that you establish trust with them.”

-LEAP Intern, Vermont Association of the Blind and Visually Impaired

DBVI staff work towards continuous improvement by listening to the voice of customers and using that information and data to improve performance. An updated DBVI State Plan with new goals and strategies was completed and approved by the State Rehabilitation Council in December 2017 and can be found at <https://dbvi.vermont.gov/resources/publications>. Please also visit the success story link on the DBVI website at [www.dbvi.vermont.gov](http://www.dbvi.vermont.gov) to see examples of people reaching their goals.